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MYSTICISM

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In his recently published *Outspoken Essays*, Dean Inge points out (p. 230) that it often happens that two opposite tendencies flourish together, deriving strength from a sense of the danger which each is threatened with by the popularity of the other. Such a tension of rival movements is very apparent in the religious life of today. On the one hand, there has been a great revival of mysticism; on the other, there has been a great revival of institutionalism. Mysticism means an immediate union with God, through Christ. Institutionalism means the mediation of the Divine Spirit through the church, ministers, sacraments. Christian mysticism derives at least from Plato and St. John. Both mystical and institutional elements proceed from Paul and St. Augustine.

That mysticism and institutionalism usually flourish together is amply attested. The flourishing ages of mysticism are the thirteenth, fourteenth, seventeenth, and nineteenth centuries—precisely those ages in which the church was much occupied with strengthening her external power. The thirteenth-fourteenth century is the golden age of mysticism, the age that produced St. Francis of Assisi, Dante, Da Todi, St. Bonaventura, Tauler, Suso, Eckhart, the *Theologia Germanica*, Ruysbroeck. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries give us St. Ignatius Loyola, St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, Boehme, Fox, Vaughan, Molinos, the “Cambridge

Platonists.” In the nineteenth century the great mystics were, for the most part, poets; Blake, Shelley, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Browning, Whittier, Emerson, Francis Thomson, the Celtic School, possess a distinctly mystical element.

It is necessary that mysticism should be balanced by a sane institutionalism, else it expands or evaporates in superstition, pantheism, or theosophy. It is significant therefore that the great mystics have almost invariably possessed a remarkably keen sense for the practical. Dean Inge (*Christian Mysticism*, p. xi) illustrates this fact as follows: Plotinus was often in request as a guardian and trustee; St. Teresa, as a founder of convents, exhibited extraordinary gifts; John Smith, the Cambridge Platonist, was the bursar of his college; Fénelon was an excellent bishop. To these one might add the names of Joan of Arc, Florence Nightingale, St. Catherine of Sienna, General Gordon, Lord Kitchener—profound mystics who made themselves felt in the world of great affairs.

As the state cannot live without the idealist, so the church would die without the mystic. It is the mystic that always saves the church. Who can estimate the prestige that St. Francis and Dante Alighieri have given to Roman Catholicism? What would the Oxford Movement have amounted to without the mystic personality of John Henry Newman? Still, the mystic is characteristically solitary, individualistic. He

hates parties and politics, whether in state or church. Dante found that he could belong to no party and became "a party to himself." For the mystic is an intense idealist, a sort of spiritual aristocrat. The institutionalist is democratic and pragmatic, political; he wishes that which will work to secure visible results and is therefore fascinated by quantity rather than quality. The mystic is pessimistic as to progress and brings to bear upon many a human aspiration for external betterment the irony of an emancipated and disillusioned spirit. Dean Inge, perhaps the most luminous mind in the Anglican church today, is called, by the unthinking, "the gloomy dean."

That there is a widespread interest in mysticism today is attested by many facts. There is the endless outpouring of books on the subject. Mysticism is being investigated from every possible point of view. For the history of mysticism we have the great works of Dean Inge (*Christian Mysticism; Studies of English Mystics; The Philosophy of Plotinus*) and Rufus Jones (*Spiritual Reformers in the 16th and 17th Centuries*). The psychology and philosophy of mysticism may be studied in the works of James (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*), Starbuck (*The Psychology of Religion*), Ames (*The Psychology of Religious Experience*), Coe (*The Spiritual Life*), Du Prel (*The Philosophy of Mysticism*), Récéjac (*The Bases of Mystic Knowledge*), Delacroix (*Etudes d'Histoire et Psychologie du Mysticisme*). There is Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism*—a most fascinating study of man's spiritual consciousness; and the more popular books of the Quaker professor, Rufus M. Jones

(*Studies in Mystical Religion, The World Within, The Inner Life*). There has been an increasing demand for the reprinting of the works of the classic mystics. The cult of the so-called New Thought, the large sale of the writings of Waldo Trine and Horatio Dresser, the popularity of the philosophy of Bergson, the Christian Science and the Emmanuel movements, are all in various ways evidence of the preoccupation of many persons today with mysticism. Lastly I may mention two books that have been written with the avowed purpose of making mystics — Evelyn Underhill's *Practical Mysticism* and Charles Morris Addison's *The Theory and Practice of Mysticism*.

What, then, is the aim of mysticism? What does mysticism claim to be able to achieve? All mystics, it is said, are one in their philosophy: "All mystics speak the same language and come from the same country." There were theologians and mystics before Plato, yet for the Christian Plato is practically the father of theology and the primal source of mystic belief. "We must," says Plato, in the *Timaeus*, "make a distinction of the two great forms of being, and ask, What is that which is and has no becoming, and what is that which is always becoming and never is?" Dante, in the *Paradiso*, first sees reality as the River of Light, that is, the ever changing flux of things; and then, when he has been perfected by being purged, he sees the Sempiternal Rose. The world is the sphere of the ever changing reality; but to the mystic it cannot be the real real; at the most that which is seen is symbolic. So the mystic's quest, his thirst, is for the unchanging Eternal. "His heart is

restless until it rests in God." The mystic differs, however, from the philosopher in that his search is not simply for an abstract Absolute. The mystic believes it is possible to pass beyond the sphere of logical thought, that is, he believes it is possible not only to infer that God *is*, but that it is possible to feel, to touch, to become actually one with God. This is the immense claim of the mystic—to attain actual union with God. He professes to be able to describe the steps of the process by which the union is attained, though he disavows the ability to define adequately the nature of the attainment, even if he is absolutely certain of it. "It is," says Miss Underhill, "the great contribution of the mystics to humanity's knowledge of the real that they find in this Absolute—a personal object of love, the goal of their quest, the 'Country of the Soul.' " Dr. Addison says he has written his book, *The Theory and Practice of Mysticism*, in order to help men find God and to know God immediately. He wishes to interest us not in the scientific or psychological explanation of mystic experience, but in mysticism as an art, a thing to be practiced with earnest determination. He wishes to make not clever critics of mysticism, but mystics.

The cause of mysticism then is man's conscious need of God. It is the conviction that the thirst for God cannot be quenched by philosophy or philanthropy alone. The mystics are those who are desperately in earnest to satisfy this thirst. Any man who profoundly wants God and seeks him is a mystic. If he seeks the Christian God, he is a Christian mystic. And if we ask the mystic how he knows that God exists, he replies—

by experience, by actually feeling God, not by knowing something about God. And he believes that his desire implies a satisfaction and arises because of the kinship between man and God. "In that thou hast sought me, thou hast already found me," says St. Augustine. But man has never really lost God; he has only lost the Way. Mysticism professes to provide the Way. It tells us that there is a path with well-defined, particular steps that all mystics traverse to find God. So one must deliberately set about to prepare one's self to meet God. "One of the marks of the true mystic," says Leuba, "is the tenacious and heroic energy with which he pursues a definite moral ideal." The actual number of steps in the Mystic Way differ with different mystics. The *Theologia Germanica* insists upon three; Dr. Addison enumerates seven. These are: (1) the longing for God, (2) the awakening of the soul, (3) the purgation or repentance, (4) running parallel with the latter, contemplation—including silence, prayer, concentration—the soul gradually putting itself more and more *en rapport* with God, (5) illumination or sense of the Divine Presence—the mountain-top is seen; (6) the dark night of the soul or the mystic death-periods of despair and doubt; (7) the unitive state—the culmination in perfect union with God. Mention might here be made of the *Divine Comedy*, which is the greatest mystical poem ever written, and in which we see the pilgrim-soul pursuing the Mystic Way.

While all mysticism is essentially one and psychological analysis of its process exhibits in general the same characteristics, yet, Dr. Addison points out

(pp. 50 f.), these differ in degree, if not in kind. For example, asceticism is a feature of all mysticism. There are, however, various degrees and kinds of self-discipline. The monastic vows are essentially mystic, but poverty, chastity, and obedience are interpreted by mystics in various ways. Poverty means one's attitude toward things, not simply the absence of things. To desire unideal things, though they be absent, is not to be "poor in spirit." This was the profound Franciscan interpretation of poverty. Lady Poverty to whom Francis was wedded was rich in spirit though poor in things. Chastity means essentially purity of heart and applies equally to the married or the unmarried. Obedience means essentially submission to God.

One of the most extraordinary claims of the mystics is that by union with God man becomes deified. Thus Clement of Alexandria said: "It is, then, the greatest of all lessons to know one's self, for if one knows himself he will know God, and knowing God, he will be made like God." Athanasius affirmed that "He became flesh that we might be made capable of receiving Divinity." Eckhart uses these bold words, "Our Lord says to every loving soul, 'I became man for you. If you do not become God for me, you do me wrong'." Quotations from the mystics of a like nature might be indefinitely increased. Dean Inge, who with an increasing number of critics, believes that Christian thought before and after the rise of the New Testament was profoundly influenced by the mystery religions, affirms that the idea of deification got into Christian mysticism through the mysteries. However startling the language they often employ, by

deification the Christian mystics simply mean that man may be saved because of his kinship to God. It is not Christian teaching that by union with God man's personality is absorbed by or in the divine to such an extent as to lose its identity. It is characteristic of the best Christian mystics to be profoundly ethical in their teaching. They believe pre-eminently in doing good works. The Christian mystic seeks union with God not that he may swoon away into nothingness. St. Francis of Assisi and St. Catherine of Sienna, the two greatest Italian mystics, experienced at times overwhelming ecstasies; yet this did not prevent them from exercising rare common sense in human affairs. In other words, as Boehme says, with regard to deification, "The deity comprehendeth the soul, but doth not alter it (from being a soul), but only giveth it the divine source or property of the majesty" (quoted by Addison, p. 71). And Ruysbroeck: "But even if the divine union be effected without medium, we must understand that God and the creature can never be confounded. The distinction remains forever inviolable" (quoted by Addison, p. 72).

If it be asked, now, how the meeting-place of man and God is to be found, the answer is that it is effected by contemplation. "This is," says Dr. Addison, "in one sense, an exercise of the mind, in another, it implies not the logical faculty but one which is mysterious and little known" (p. 75). And it is this faculty the mystic is supposed to train and employ—it is an organ, he affirms, that is common not to a few geniuses, but to all men and is found in the depth of one's nature. Rufus Jones says that

"God is the ground of the soul, and in the depth of their being all men partake of one central divine life." Mysticism has been defined as "the art of finding God in one's self." Knowledge of God must be, then, according to the mystic, personal, direct, intuitive. We know God, said Plotinus, by "another intellect, different from that which reasons and is denominated rational." "Herein," says Dr. Addison, "does mysticism differ from those forms of religion which we call the dogmatic or intellectual, or which we call the ritualistic or institutional. The mystic is however in all other respects like all other Christians plus the use of this organ" (p. 97). The mystic admits it is true, that this "organ" needs to be further explored before it can be adequately defined; but he is positive as to its existence and for the defense of its reality he calls in the aid of the philosophies of James and Bergson.

Naturally mysticism has not escaped criticism. There are those who ask, "If spiritual truth cannot be apprehended by the mind, the logical faculty, how *can* it be apprehended?" Thus the most pitiless criticism of mysticism is probably that of George Santayana, to whom Bergson and all his works are anathema, and to whom mysticism appeals, apparently, only aesthetically. Says Santayana (*Reason and Religion*, pp. 277 f.):

The mystic is all faith, all love, all vision, but he is each of these things *in vacuo*, and in the absence of any object.

Mysticism can exist, in varying degrees, at any stage of rational development. Saints and philosophers grow mystical in their highest flights. But mysticism is not an ultimate attitude, rather is it the most primitive of feelings and only visits formed

minds in moments of intellectual arrest and dissolution. It can exist in a child, very likely in an animal—indeed only the pure mystics are the brutes.

All religion, science, art is subject to incidental mysticism; but in no case can mysticism stand alone and be a basis of anything.

Furthermore in his *Poetry and Religion* (p. 15) Santayana affirms that

the ideal of mysticism is exactly contrary to the ideal of reason; instead of perfecting the human nature, it seeks to abolish it; instead of building a better world, it would undermine the foundations even of the world we have already built; instead of developing our minds to greater scope and precision, it would return to the condition of protoplasm. . . . While the Christian mystics have clung, out of respect for authority, to traditional theology, such concessions are inconsistent with the mystical spirit which will never be satisfied, if fully developed and fearless, with anything short of Absolute Nothing.

Criticism we imagine does not, however, greatly disturb the born, or even made, mystic. He is certain of the validity of his religious experience. He does not believe he is putting his faith in a vacuum. Mysticism is the life-blood of all religion. If we know or believe that God exists, we cannot prove it by the logical faculty. Thus far mysticism is true to the facts. But many thinkers are unwilling to accord to intuition that place of supremacy Bergson gives it. They would say that if we believe in God and experience him it is with our whole personality. Again, are we to consider the mystic the normally spiritual person and must every religious person become converted? Dr. Addison, for example, lays great stress

upon conversion. That the mystic is a true type of a religious man one need not deny, even if he believes it is not a normal, but an abnormal, type. The mystic is an adventurer in the realm of mystic is "an adventurer in the realm of the spirit"—his experience is a true one for him, but not necessarily for all. We cannot consider a person unspiritual if he cannot relish, for example, Dante. As to conversion, many spiritual persons have never experienced it. Dean Inge says among his friends he never knew one who had been converted. If James, in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, makes much of the data of conversion, we must remember that the book has been dubbed "Some Wild Religions I Have Known," and that the data are drawn from narrow sources.

The fact is there are various types of the Christian: a man may be a humanist, a mystic, a scientific, or an institutionalist—a Christian. The history of the church shows that when one type becomes too powerful there is a reaction and so every age seems to be in rebellion to its predecessor. If the mystic at his worst is prone to trust to vagaries, to be self-centered, to flee the world, to be unsocial and unethical, the institutionalist too easily cultivates the arts of the politician and stresses unduly practical activity, to the detriment of the claims of the mind and the heart. Just now a visible reaction is setting in against institutionalism. People are becoming

weary with the growing complexity of church machinery, with philosophies and theologies *about* God. There is a great hunger for spiritual religion. But many of the rulers of the churches do not sufficiently perceive this or think to feed the hunger by making the machinery of the church more and more complicated. Church machinery does not create great spiritual leaders. It does not require deep spirituality or fine culture to keep the church machine well oiled. The church machine is of course necessary, but in the long run it is found that the machine has no oil if the mystic well has run dry. We may not expect great religious leaders until mysticism has become again the predominant force in the church.

Not since before the Reformation has there been so much interest in the subject of mysticism as there is today. The causes for the recrudescence of mysticism are many. There is the reaction against the overinstitutionalized type of religion that has been growing in vigor during the last two or three generations; the revolt from hard materialism and the arrogance of science; secularism; the positively spiritual and aesthetic charm and attractiveness of much that is mystical; the philosophy of James, Eucken, and Bergson. The church in the immediate future may diminish in numbers, but it is pretty safe to predict that its life will be more intensely spiritual and mystical than it has been for generations.